



The Transition to Leadership

In this short paper, we re-visit some ideas about careers and leadership, putting them into the context of a business world changed not only by Covid-19 but also the movements calling for action on climate change, social justice and diversity and inclusion.



DEFINING LEADERSHIP

What is leadership? It's the act of inspiring and influencing others to follow in a certain direction. There are many theories about business leadership, ranging from Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, from thousands of years ago, to Jim Collins' *Level 5 Leaders* and Simon Sinek's more empathetic approach in *Leaders Eat Last*.

"Great leaders are born, not made", some would argue, usually citing Winston Churchill or Nelson Mandela as examples. We disagree leadership involves a range of skills that people can learn, just as they learn how to design a new process or to install network components. Naturally, there are some innate personality traits that might help (e.g. a high EQ score), but most leadership skills can be developed over the course of a career. This is best done by a combination of direct experience and regular training.

In a world full of ambiguity and uncertainty, disruption, and continuous change, facing political, social, and economic challenges, leaders must demonstrate a vision that guides and inspires their teams as they transform their business. This cannot be done with functional expertise alone.

Events in 2020 have made this even clearer. The challenges of the pandemic, remote working, staff lay-offs and restricted movement have brought the concept of corporate leadership into sharp focus. Public concerns around climate change, social justice and diversity & inclusion add further pressure as people question the value of corporations and the market economy.



MANAGEMENT VS LEADERSHIP

Although often used as interchangeable words, the distinction between management and leadership is a key topic for business academics. Warren Bennis highlighted how unsuccessful organisations tend to be over-managed and under-led; management is about how and when, processes and policies – leadership is about why and what, relationships and trust. It's the difference between managing the status quo and making changes for the future. Managers need to develop a range of leadership skills, in order to be able to build multi-functional teams, accelerate change and manage internal and external stakeholders. This transition from management to leadership is a key challenge for any would-be leader. How do you navigate the move from the application of hard skills, that are necessary and essential at the early career stages, to the so-called soft skills, needed for mid to senior executive roles?



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Consultants Bain talk about this dilemma as “performance skills vs inspirational skills.” In a world of flat hierarchies and cross-functional teams, inspirational skills have already established their

importance. Add uncertainty and disruption to the mix and it's clear that inspiration must be the priority.

DEFINING THE SOFT SKILLS

“Soft skills” is the conventional term for these less tangible qualifications. It's not a phrase we particularly like – for one thing, as a lawyer once put it to us, they are actually much more difficult to master than the “hard skills”. But it's useful shorthand for the range of skills and behaviours that characterise leadership.

Many studies – from management consultants, business schools, leadership gurus – have tried to define these skills more precisely. Resilience, being supportive, seeking out diversity, focusing on results, looking ahead are all behaviours that consistently come up. Bain, in their “Inspirational Leadership Model”, identified 33 characteristics of great leaders, with “Centeredness” at the heart of all of them – picking up on the current theme of mindfulness in the



workplace. McKinsey add effective problem-solving to the mix. Others include listening, communication and negotiation and other interpersonal skills. These are all necessary for leading people and for setting strategy and making good decisions.

Professor Goleman talks about the 6 Leadership styles, ranging from more autocratic to more empowering, each applicable for different business situations. Jack Welch, legendary former CEO of General Electric, writing on LinkedIn, listed 5 qualities – positive energy, the ability to energise others, the ability to make tough decisions (“edge”), a talent to get things done and above all, passion. But a common theme is always the ability to handle – and drive – change. John Kotter highlighted this in his Harvard Business Review article many years ago, noting that the leader’s primary role is to help organisations prepare for, and successfully cope with, change. Change involves uncertainty and discomfort that cannot be managed away with “hard skills” – e.g. budgets and plans: Kotter highlights how leaders must apply their “soft leadership skills” to align the whole organisation behind the change.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

The concept that encapsulates most of these ideas is “Emotional Intelligence” (EQ). Pioneered by Daniel Goleman, this is a leadership idea that has taken root in the past two decades. The word ‘emotional’ in the context of management may not always sit comfortably in sectors based on rational science and hard engineering industry. But “Emotional Intelligence” is now part of the armoury of leadership skills and is now widely used in many of the most successful global firms.

EQ, as it is often known, refers to the ability to understand and manage your own and other’s emotions, and starts with self-awareness. In the workplace, this means understanding how you react in different situations and how your emotions affect problem-solving, decision-making and team dynamics. And in addition to managing your own emotions, EQ means being able to identify and manage how others react and behave.

“If people *feel* you are fully supporting them, they will follow you anywhere”



DOES YOUR COMPANY ENCOURAGE THE TRANSITION?

Developing and applying these soft skills is easier if the organisation's culture encourages it. Firms that successfully develop their leaders make such a transition from "hard professional to soft leadership skills" easy. They create a culture of openness and empowerment. They enable considered risk-taking and encourage challenges to the status quo, and they expose managers to change early on in their careers. This doesn't happen in companies where leaders rely on authority rather than influence, and where a particular "hard skill" such as finance, or engineering, or sales, dominates their management thinking and the company's culture.

Defining leadership in today's industry, a senior energy executive told us: "Most technical people in the business are highly focused on their particular area, so the leader needs to make sure appropriate integration of ideas and information takes place routinely." The leader needs to ask just enough questions to make sure this is happening, but without interfering or asking irrelevant questions. But most importantly, after describing the processes and data a leader needs to apply, he ended on an "Emotional Intelligence" note: "If people *feel* that you are fully *supporting them* to deliver the best possible work product, they will follow you anywhere".

DEVELOP YOUR LEADERSHIP SKILLS

What does all this mean for the functional manager who wants to become an effective leader across the business? Here are a few suggestions:

1. Understand your own leadership style: what is your dominant characteristic? Which others do you need to develop?
2. Understand what (and who) drives behaviours in your organisation, and what the organisational culture is. Find ways you can help shape the culture.
3. Recognise the role of emotional intelligence, and that feeling as well as thinking is part of decision-making.
4. Make sure you understand the business beyond your function, and be clear how your function contributes to the overall goal.
5. Manage upwards and horizontally. Get to know your counterparts in other functions.



6. Build your own career development plan, discussing ideas with your HR partners. Find a mentor who can help you.

This is one of a series of WBC papers on the topic of Leadership in business. The issues raised in these papers are covered in detail in our 3-Day Leadership programmes, delivered by former executives who are leadership development experts. The courses are designed to help managers make the transition from functional management to corporate leadership. With case studies and examples from across many sectors they are ideal for anyone looking to move into a senior leadership position.

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